

A BASHFUL SANTA CLAUS



By Wilbur D. Nesbit

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It was Christmas eve.

Andrew Hillington, with a neat little package in his breast pocket and a throbbing heart beneath the same pocket, had been trying for a full hour to muster up enough courage to take out the package, and offer it, together with his throbbing heart, to Amabel Tuttle.

Amabel was just such a young woman as just such a young man as Andrew would ardently desire to present with his throbbing heart and the contents of the neat package. The latter contained a ring, set with a single diamond. The throbbing heart contained what Andrew was ready to promise should be life-long devotion to Amabel.

Why go into detail regarding the whole year during which he had laid siege to the heart of Amabel?

There had been moments this Christmas eve when Andrew's fingers nervously sought his breast pocket. Amabel knew he was on the verge of proposing. Gracious mercy! The woman who cannot diagnose a threatened proposal is no woman at all. The stammering speech, the flushed brow, the hesitant remarks, the fixity of stare—all these and many other symptoms are to the average woman what temperature and respiration are to the specialist in fevers.

For some unexplained reason women like to postpone a proposal. They prolong the agony. They enjoy the sighs, the awkwardness, the anxiety, of the swain. They revel in his subject willingness to sacrifice himself, if need be, to gain their promise.

It may be that instinct teaches them this is the only moment when the man will be a slave.

At last, however, it became time for Andrew to say good-night. It was Christmas eve, and he knew Amabel's family would have some little preparations to make for the festivities of the morrow. He did not think for a moment of the tremendous fact that when a young woman allows a young man to spend Christmas eve with her she is writing "Yes" in large letters on the wall. No man can realize anything at such times.

Andrew said he must be going, after Amabel had begun to wonder if he was going to talk about the weather and the latest book all evening.

"Must you go, really?" she asked, brightly. "Wait just a moment. I have something for you."

She went into another room, then came back with a small package, which she handed to him.

"Just a little Christmas remembrance," she smiled. "You won't



Just a Little Christmas Remembrance.

mind getting it ahead of time, will you? Such good friends as you and I needn't wait for Christmas day itself, need we?"

She carefully stood immediately beneath a spray of mistletoe when she said this, but Andrew did not notice it. This is further proof that love is blind.

"Thank you," Andrew mumbled, nervously. "I—I wish you a merry Christmas, Amabel."

"That's nice of you, and I hope you like the little gift. It really isn't a gift, Andrew. It's just a necktie I made for you myself. I wish it could have been something nicer—but you'll let the sentiment that goes with it count for what it lacks in value or beauty, won't you?"

She carelessly reached up and adjusted the spray of mistletoe, smiling also at Andrew. Andrew stood there, turning the package over and over in his hands, blind as ever. What Amabel thought he never will know. There must be times while a woman is landing a man that she is so enraged with his obtuseness that she would keenly enjoy thumping him on the head with a shovel.

Andrew got his eyes away from hers long enough to ask:

"Are you going to have a Christmas tree?"

"No. We're old-fashioned, you know. We're just going to hang up our stockings in front of the grate, and let Santa come right down the chimney. I love those old customs, don't you?"

As she spoke of the old customs she once more pushed the spray of mistletoe up into place. This time Andrew saw it, and away down deep in his heart he wished he were just a good friend of Amabel's.

You see, under the mistletoe, things may be done by good friends which would call out the troops if attempted by a lover who has not yet declared



"Oh, Andrew!"

his love in speech, but whose every action tells what is affecting him.

He told her he had spent a pleasant evening; he thanked her for the little gift; he promised to come again, and he got out and away—and then he realized that he had not given her the present he had meant to hand to her with a few well chosen words which should cause her to fall into his arms and promise to be his forever. Also, he realized that he had not even wished her a merry Christmas in the way he had planned to wish it.

All the way home he abused himself for being such a fool. Why, any man with a spark of self-confidence, he told himself, would have told the girl what he had in his heart and in his pocket for her—would have made a neat but effective little speech of presentation, and would have concluded his peroration with her head against his shoulder and her plump white hand in his.

There came to him a flash of inspiration.

Why not play Santa Claus, take the ring to Amabel's home, climb in a side window from the porch, deposit the ring and a note in her stocking? This would make her feel that he had planned it all as a real Christmas surprise for her. A Christmas gift and a Christmas proposal all at once would certainly appeal to the romantic side of any girl.

So he wrote his note, wrapped it about the ring, replaced the ring and the note in the little box, wrapped it up, and betook himself to Amabel's home.

The porch from which he planned to effect his surreptitious entrance was a side one. He remembered that last summer Amabel's father had said he must have the catch on the window repaired. He knew perfectly well Amabel's father hadn't done so—for he knew Amabel's father was like all men.

Through the side yard and over the porch rail he went. The window he found unfastened. Carefully he raised it and felt his way into the room. To his astonishment he saw a ray of light beneath the door and heard voices in the adjoining room—where the stockings were to be hung.

"Well, Amabel," her father was saying, "what did Romeo have to say to-night?"

The reply was a sniff from Amabel, which Andrew interpreted as being a suggestion to her father that he mind his own affairs.

"Did you give him the necktie?" Amabel's mother asked.

"Yes."

"Did he like it?"

"He never looked at it."

"Well, I must say! In my time a young man would have shown more gallantry."

"Not a Hillington, mother," Mr. Tuttle said. "They never think of what to say until a week later."

Andrew grated his teeth. This was true, but not pleasant.

"Well, you couldn't expect him to tell how he liked it when he hadn't seen it," Amabel said, stoutly. "And it wouldn't have been polite for him



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to look at it right there—besides, I shouldn't have given it to him to-night."

"No," her mother said. "That made it look as though you expected something from him."

Andrew was standing in the darkness, in the middle of the room. He wished the family would quit talking—especially as they were talking of him—and go to bed and allow him to drop his gift into Amabel's stocking. He did not dare to move, for fear of running into some furniture. He hardly dared breathe.

Suddenly from down street came the clang of a gong. Also the clatter of horses' hoofs on the frozen highway and the rumble of wheels. The noise increased as the horses drew near, to subside and cease in front of the house. The Tuttles heard it.

"Must be a fire, or the patrol wagon," Mr. Tuttle exclaimed, throwing open the room where Andrew stood. Andrew darted behind a bookcase just in time. Mr. Tuttle went through the room to the hall and opened the front door. Mrs. Tuttle followed him, despite Amabel's remonstrances that she would catch cold.

There was the sound of hurried footsteps up the walk.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Tuttle asked.

"Where is he?" said a voice.

"Where's who?"

"Patrolman Jones telephoned that he saw a man breaking into your house."

Andrew shivered with alarm. This was a predicament. To be arrested as a burglar, to be carted off to jail, without a chance to explain. He peered from behind the bookcase and saw Amabel dreamily hanging her stocking. He swiftly came from his hiding place, and silently hurried to her side. Taking the package from his pocket, he whispered:

"Amabel! I—I forgot to tell you I love you, and here's my proposal, and the engagement ring, too!"

The mere fact that he had appeared thus mysteriously at her side did not appeal to Amabel. She did not think of that at all. She said:

"Oh, Andrew!"

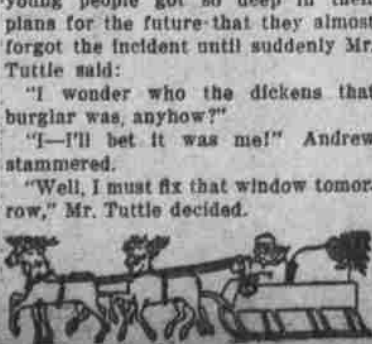
And she then allowed herself to fall into his arms.

That there was much excited conversation in the hall, that men were running around the house and peering into dark corners in the basement and in the upper rooms was something of which Andrew and Amabel were entirely unaware. Mr. and Mrs. Tuttle came back, after the officers had gone away utterly bewildered. Even they had been so excited that the presence of Andrew struck them as nothing unusual. Amabel's shy but delighted announcement of her engagement was received merrily, however. In fact, father and mother Tuttle and the young people got so deep in their plans for the future that they almost forgot the incident until suddenly Mr. Tuttle said:

"I wonder who the dickens that burglar was, anyhow?"

"I'll bet it was me!" Andrew stammered.

"Well, I must fix that window tomorrow," Mr. Tuttle decided.



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